



## Parenting the Adopted Adolescent



Most parents worry about their child when he or she reaches adolescence. Will the child who was once easygoing and helpful become moody and disrespectful? Will the child who was fiercely independent when young become a teen who gives in to peer pressure? Will the child who has had a conventional style of dress suddenly color his or her hair purple?

### What's Inside:

- How children develop
- Typical adolescent behavior
- Adoption and adolescence
- When teens were adopted at an older age
- When parents should become concerned

When adopted children reach adolescence, their parents are likely to be anxious and have an additional set of questions. Will the child become confused about his or her identity? Will a sense of abandonment and rejection replace feelings of security and comfort? Is the child behaving in a way that reflects inner turmoil about the past? Each of these questions leads to a larger issue: Will being adopted make adolescence harder for the child?

These questions don't have simple answers. Only a few studies have compared the psychological well-being of adopted adolescents with that of nonadopted adolescents. Some of those studies conclude that having been adopted makes no difference in adolescent behavior. Others suggest that adopted teenagers are more likely than others to experience problems. Experts disagree about the relative importance of the role of parents, the "climate" of the family, and the natural temperament of the teenager as contributors to adolescent problems. There are two points on which they agree, however. (1) Being adopted is an undeniable part of a teen's history and should not be ignored. (2) Adopted adolescents can successfully confront and resolve their special developmental issues.

This factsheet is a guide to parents of adopted teenagers. It focuses on child development, typical adolescent behavior, the special issues of adopted teenagers, the times when parents should become concerned, and the steps parents can take to make these difficult years more manageable.

## How Children Develop

From infancy on, children alternate between bonding with their caregivers and learning to become independent. Infants begin to gain independence by learning to crawl and then walk. As infants become toddlers, they start to give nonverbal and later verbal messages that express their wishes and opinions.

Up to about age 6, children absorb information rapidly, asking questions nonstop. They are able to think about being abandoned, getting lost, or no longer being loved by their parents. They often have trouble telling the difference between reality and fantasy. At the same time, they experience separation from loved ones as they attend preschool or daycare programs and broaden their interests and group of friends.

The inner lives of children take shape between the ages of 6 and 11. From the security of their families, children begin to expand their horizons and participate in more activities away from home. It can be a difficult time. Children must cement their sense of belonging to their family while mastering the knowledge and skills required for independence. It is no wonder that by the time they become teenagers their struggles to form an identity may feel overwhelming and may lead to perplexing, and sometimes troublesome, behavior.

## Typical Adolescent Behavior

Adolescence is a trying time of life for both teenagers and their families. The physical aspects of adolescence—a growth spurt, breast development for girls, a deepening of the voice for boys—are obvious and happen quickly, whereas mental and emotional development may take years.

The main challenge for teenagers is to form their own identity—an achievement not nearly as simple as it sounds. It means, according to adoption experts Kenneth W. Watson and Miriam Reitz, that teenagers must define their values, beliefs, gender identification, career choice, and expectations of themselves.

In forming an identity, most adolescents try on a variety of personas. They look for, imitate, and then reject role models. They examine their families critically—idolizing some people, devaluing others. They shun or embrace family values, traditions, ideas, and religious beliefs. Sometimes they have enormous self-confidence; sometimes they feel at loose ends and think of themselves as utterly worthless. They may believe something one day, and then change their minds and think the opposite the next day. Ultimately, they must come to terms with the big questions: Who am I? Where do I belong?

Teenagers are acutely aware that they are growing away from their families. As they look for ways to demonstrate their individuality, they often take on the values, beliefs, and actions of others their age or of

celebrities they admire. Even though they are trying to set themselves apart from their families, they often want to look, act, and dress just like their friends.

Teenagers are still dependent on their parents, however, and may veer back and forth between striking out and staying close. “Parents should realize,” write Jerome Smith and Franklin Miroff in their book *You’re Our Child: The Adoption Experience*, “that the adolescent is primarily a child and not an adult, except in the biological sense. Emotionally, he is still as dependent on his parents as always.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that disagreements between parents and teenagers occur. Adolescents want independence, yet they are unsure how much freedom they can really handle. Parents want their teens to move toward self-sufficiency but often are reluctant to give up control. Teenagers are confused about their futures, and parents are anxious about who or what their sons and daughters will become.

Adolescents wrestle with issues of sexuality and spend time thinking about and wishing for romantic relationships. Parents worry about their teenagers’ choices of partners and friends. Often, parents don’t know what advice to give or how to give it.

These kinds of tensions generally characterize the parent–teen relationship. There are additional issues for teens who came to their families through adoption.

## Adoption and Adolescence

Adoption adds complexity to parenting adolescents. Adopted teenagers may need extra support in dealing with issues that take on special meaning for them—identity formation, fear of rejection and abandonment, issues of control and autonomy, the feeling of not belonging, and heightened curiosity about the past.

### Identity Formation

Identity issues can be difficult for adopted teens because they have two sets of parents. Not knowing about their birthparents can make them question who they really are. It becomes more challenging for them to sort out how they are similar to and different from both sets of parents.

Adopted teenagers may wonder who gave them their particular characteristics. They may want answers to questions their adoptive parents may not be able to provide: Where do I get my artistic talent? Was everyone in my birth family short? What is my ethnic background? Do I have brothers and sisters?

Sixteen-year-old Jennifer explains, “I’m trying to figure out what I want to do in my life. But I’m so confused. I can’t move ahead with my future when I don’t know anything about my past. It’s like starting to read a book in the middle. My big family with cousins and aunts and uncles only makes me aware that I’m alone in my situation. It never bothered me when I was younger. But now, for reasons I can’t explain, I feel like

a puppet without a string, and it’s making me miserable.”

Some teens may feel more angry at their adoptive parents than they have ever felt before. They may be critical of how their parents helped them adjust to their adoptive status. They may withdraw into themselves or feel they need to stray far from home to find their true identity.

### Fear of Abandonment

Jayne Schooler, an adoption professional in Ohio and the author of *Searching for a Past*, writes that it is not unusual for adopted teenagers to fear leaving home. Leaving home is scary for most adolescents, but because adoptees have already suffered the loss of one set of parents, it is even more frightening.

Seventeen-year-old Caroline, for instance, who was adopted as an infant, seemed to have her future well in hand. She was offered a partial scholarship to play field hockey at an out-of-state university, and she planned to pursue a career in teaching. Her parents were eager to help their daughter move on to this next part of her life. However, perplexing changes occurred halfway through Caroline’s final semester in high school. She began skipping classes. She was “forgetting” to do her homework. She spent more time than usual alone in her room. When her parents mentioned college, she ran into her bedroom and slammed the door.

At first her parents were puzzled. But they soon became alarmed when her grades dropped and her personality changed. They encouraged her to talk to a family friend who was a clinical psychologist. Several months of therapy helped Caroline and

her parents understand that moving away from her family and familiar surroundings scared her. Perhaps if she were at school, her parents would forget about her. Maybe there would be no home to go back to. After all, it had happened before.

At her parents' suggestion, Caroline decided to put her college plans on hold for a year. She and her parents continued to participate in counseling to sort out the issues that were blocking her development.

The Badeaus of Philadelphia are the parents of 20 children, 18 of whom were adopted. They see a number of differences in the way their birth children and adopted children cope with separation. "Now that our birth children are adolescents—one's 12 and one's 14," says Sue Badeau, "we see that they are already talking about college...what they want to do when they grow up and how they can't wait to get out of the house! It's the complete opposite for our adopted kids. It seems really difficult for them to imagine themselves as independent people. They seem almost afraid to leave the security of the family."

## Issues of Control

The tension between parents who don't want to give up control and the teenager who wants independence is the hallmark of adolescence. This tension may be especially intense for adopted teens who feel that someone else has always made decisions for them: the birthmother made the decision to place them for adoption; the adoptive parents decided whether to accept them. Parents may feel pressure to control their teens, sometimes motivated by concerns that their teens have a predisposition

toward antisocial behavior—especially when their teens' birthparents have a history of alcoholism or drug abuse.

Parents worry, too, about their teens' sexual behavior. What if their son or daughter becomes sexually active, becomes or gets a partner pregnant, or gets AIDS? Adopted girls may have particular concerns about sexuality and motherhood. On the one hand, they have the adoptive mother, frequently infertile, and on the other, the birthmother, who had a baby but chose not to raise the child. How do adoptive parents help their daughters come to terms with these different role models?

Because of their fears, many adoptive parents tighten the reins precisely when their teenagers want more freedom. "Kids see it as—You don't trust me," says Anne McCabe, postadoption specialist at Tabor Children's Services in Philadelphia and a family therapist in private practice specializing in working with adoptive families. "It can strongly affect the trust level between parents and their teens." McCabe advises that parents and teens work together to identify options for building trust in important areas such as schoolwork, chores, choice of friends, choice of leisure time activities, and curfew. Parents and their teen can come to an agreement on what constitutes trustworthy behavior in each area. They can determine what privileges or consequences will be earned if the teen either demonstrates or doesn't demonstrate the behavior in an identified time frame. Both parties have input, and there are fewer power struggles.

## The Feeling of Not Belonging

Teens raised in their birth families can easily see ways in which they are like their family members. Their musical talent comes from their grandmother...Their father also has red hair...Everyone in the family wears glasses. Sometimes adopted teens have no such markers, and, in fact, are reminded frequently that they are different from their nonadopted friends.

This feeling of being different often begins with their physical appearance. Friends frequently look like one of their parents or another relative. Teens who were adopted may not have a relative they resemble. Friends who comment, "You look like your sister," often make an adopted teen even more aware of his or her "outsider" status, even if he or she happens to look like the sister. Sometimes, adopted teenagers won't even correct friends who comment on a family resemblance. It is easier than having to answer the questions that are sure to follow: Who are your real parents? What do they look like? Why didn't they keep you?

"People who note a family resemblance are really trying to say that the child has taken on some of their parents' mannerisms," says McCabe. "In some families, it can become an inside joke. For other children, it can expose a raw nerve."

Teens who have been adopted into a family of a different race (transracial adoption) often feel more alienated from their families than they did when they were younger. They become highly conscious of the obvious physical differences between themselves and their families, and they struggle to integrate their cultural backgrounds into their perceptions of who they are. Some

adopted teens may doubt their authenticity as "real" family members and, therefore, feel uncertain about their futures.

Adoptive parents can help transracially adopted teens to feel they belong by making sure that the family frequently associates with other adults and children of the same ethnic background as their teen. They should celebrate their own and their teen's culture as a part of daily life. They should talk about race and culture often, yet tolerate no ethnically or racially biased remarks from others. For further discussion of these and other suggestions for transracial families, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet, *Transracial and Transcultural Adoption* ([www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_trans.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_trans.cfm)). To increase the feeling of belonging for an adopted teen of the same race as his or her parents but who may look very different, parents should point out any similarities that exist between family members. Statements such as "Everyone in our family loves to sleep late on weekends" or "Dad and you are both such Rolling Stones fans, you're driving me crazy!" should be made whenever appropriate.

## The Need to Connect With The Past

As adopted teens mature, they think more about how their lives would have been different if they had not been adopted or if they had been adopted by another family. They frequently wonder who they would have become under other circumstances. For them, the need to try on different personalities is particularly meaningful. In addition to all of the possibilities life holds, adoptees realize the possibilities that were lost.



For some adopted teenagers, the feelings of loss and abandonment cause them to think and want more information about their original families. Sometimes they are looking for more information about their medical history. Has anyone in their family had allergies? Heart disease? Cancer? Seventeen-year-old Sheila, who developed unexplained skin rashes, always wondered if others in her birth family had the same condition. As 18-year-old Christopher kept reading more articles about the genetic nature of mental illness, he worried that his mood swings might be an indication of manic-depressive illness that could have been present in his birth family. Adopted as a baby, Sally, now 15, says, “It’s impossible for someone who has not been adopted to understand the vacuum created by not knowing where you came from. No matter how much I read or talk to my parents about it I can’t fully explain the emptiness I feel.”

Some teenagers want to search for their birthparents. Others say they would appreciate having access to medical information, but that they have made peace with their adoptions.

## When Teens Were Adopted at an Older Age

Issues for teens adopted at an older age are even more complex. Often they endured abuse or neglect, lived in several foster homes, or moved from relative to relative before finding a permanent family. Their

sense of loss and rejection may be intense, and they may suffer from seriously low self-esteem. They also can have severe emotional and behavioral difficulties as a result of early interruptions in the attachment process with their caregivers. It is no wonder that it is hard for them to trust adults—the adults in their early years, for whatever reason, did not meet their emotional needs.

Teens adopted at an older age bring with them memories of times before joining the adoptive family. It is important for them to be allowed to acknowledge those memories and talk about them. Parents of teens adopted at an older age can expect that they and their teens will require professional guidance at some point, or at several points, to help create and maintain healthy family relationships.

## When Parents Should Become Concerned

Adopted teens may experience strong emotions, especially related to their adoption. It would be unusual for their adopted status not to affect them. A teen’s sense of abandonment, quest for identity, and need for control probably do not have their origin in poor parenting by the adoptive parents.

If a teen decides to search for his or her birthparents, it is not necessarily an indication of a problem. Research indicates that some adoptees simply have a strong need to know about their biological roots. “One of the misconceptions [that adoptive parents have],” says Marshall Schechter, M.D., professor emeritus in child and adolescent

psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, “is that they have done something to make their child want to search. They haven’t. Everyone needs to know that they are part of a continuum of a family ... As more is learned about genetics, scientists are discovering that many talents or personality traits have a genetic basis. So it should not be surprising that teenagers who focus on developing an identity should begin thinking about their origin.”

It is more likely that a teen will have problems in families “where the parents insist that adoption is no different from the biological parent–child relationship,” says Kenneth Kirby, Ph.D., from the Department of Clinical Psychiatry at Northwestern University School of Medicine in Chicago. Teens know that it is different. Teens do better when their parents understand their curiosity about their genetic history and allow them to express their grief, anger, and fear.

The following behaviors may indicate a teen is struggling with adoption issues:

- comments about being treated unfairly compared to the family’s birth children
- a new problem in school, such as trouble paying attention
- a sudden preoccupation with the unknown
- problems with peers
- shutting down emotionally and refusing to share feelings.

If your family style is one of open communication, you may be able to deal with these issues without professional help. Educate yourself through books or workshops run by agencies that provide postadoption services.

Join an adoptive parent support group, which can be a valuable resource for families. Child Welfare Information Gateway can refer you to adoptive parent support groups in your area. Support groups also exist for adopted teenagers.

Chances are that if you have not been comfortable discussing adoption issues with your child in the past, it will be difficult to begin now. “The time to start talking about these issues is when children are younger,” says MaryLou Edgar, postadoption specialist with Tressler Lutheran Children’s Services in Wilmington, Delaware. “Otherwise, your kids know you aren’t comfortable with the subject. It’s like sex. One talk when your child is 12 isn’t enough.” Nonetheless, even if these discussions have not taken place earlier, it is up to the parents to initiate them with their teenagers, Edgar advises.

Many families benefit from seeing a therapist who specializes in working with adoptive families. Adoptive family organizations, adoption agencies in your area, and Information Gateway may be helpful in suggesting knowledgeable therapists. See the Information Gateway factsheet, *After Adoption: The Need for Services* ([www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_after/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_after/index.cfm)), for a discussion of the types of therapists.

As with all teens, you should seek professional help if you see any of the following behaviors:

- drug or alcohol abuse
- a drastic drop in grades or a sharp increase in skipping school
- withdrawal from family and friends
- risk taking



- suicide threats or attempt.

If adoption is part of the problem, openly addressing adoption issues will improve the chances that the treatment will be effective. Parents who recognize that their teens have two sets of parents and who don't feel threatened by that fact are more likely to establish a more positive environment for their teens, one that will make them feel more comfortable to express their feelings. "Kids know early on what subjects their parents are uncomfortable discussing and will avoid them," says McCabe. "Secrets take a lot of energy. When there is freedom to discuss adoption issues, there is much less of a burden on the family."

"There is a significant difference in the way teenagers perceive themselves when they have information about their birth families—ethnic heritage, abilities, education, or just what they looked like," says Marcie Griffen, postadoption counselor at Hope Cottage Adoption Services in Dallas, Texas. "When they know why they were placed for adoption, it tends to help their self-esteem and give them a better sense of who they are."

Sue Badeau understands her children's need to connect with their biological parents. She and her husband Hector agree that openness is important to the well-being of everyone in the adoption triad (adoptive parents, birthparents, and the adopted person). The Badaeus are committed to helping their children discover their roots if and when they want to. Recently, the Badaeus located the birthmother of four of their children: Flora, Sue Ann, Abel, and George. Flora, 13, was having trouble giving up the fantasy that her birthmother was going to come back for them so "they could live happily ever after."

Sue and Hector persuaded their children's birthmother to assist them in helping Flora put her fantasies to rest. The birthmother helped Flora understand why she and her siblings were placed for adoption. Sue Ann was grateful for the chance to have some of her questions answered, but the boys wanted nothing to do with their birthmother at that time. "I keep telling all of my kids that their families did the best that they could," says Sue. "Birthmothers aren't the horrible monsters people make them out to be, but real people who make mistakes."

## Conclusion

Adolescence can be a confusing time for teens. Adopted teens may have special issues connected to identity formation, rejection, control, and the need to connect with one's roots. It helps when parents are understanding and supportive. Questions surrounding these issues are not a reflection of adoptive parents' parenting style. Wanting to know about their birth family does not mean that adopted teens are rejecting their adoptive family.

If your family has a long-standing history of openness, honesty, and comfort with adoption, chances are that you will be able to help your teen work through adolescence. When openness has not been your family style, or if you see alarming behaviors such as drug use or withdrawal from enjoyable activities, you should seek professional help.

Mental health experts are confident that adopted teens can confront and resolve their developmental issues just as their nonadopted peers do. With the support and

understanding of their parents, adopted teens can forge even stronger family bonds that will continue to nurture their future relationships.

Find additional resources on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov).

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